

# Horace *Odes* 1.3 and Vergil's *Aeneid*

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In 23 B.C. Horace published his first three books of *Odes* and brought the glories of Greek lyric to the Latin language. Meanwhile Vergil was working on the *Aeneid*, and giving Latin something related to the Greek epics of Homer and Apollonius of Rhodes, whose third-century B.C. epic told the story of Jason and the Argonauts. This was a great undertaking, as Vergil himself had previously acknowledged in the *Georgics*, and not for the faint-hearted. Vergil had already taken on the challenges of pastoral poetry through the *Eclogues* and of didactic with the *Georgics*; nevertheless, the challenge of epic was quite another matter. To bring into the Romans' own language the poems at the root of poetry as they knew it was a voyage of discovery unlike any yet undertaken.

## Long day's journey into night

Horace in *Odes* 1.3 uses the form of a *propempticon*, a poem written to wish someone well as they depart on a journey, to pray for Vergil's well-being as he takes on this mighty task. Vergil was about to set out on a journey to Attica but was also engaged in a far more challenging voyage: a poetic voyage, which would take him to the very heart of Greek literature.

The poem is packed with allusions, both to mythical events and literary works, which give it further meaning. The mythical references include the stealing of fire by Prometheus and the doomed attempts by Daedalus to get his son airborne – warnings to man that attempts to be too clever and challenge the gods will end in disaster. The poem concludes with the explicit warning: 'Heaven itself we seek in our folly, and through our sin we let Jove lay down his bolts of wrath.' In mythical terms, Horace has in mind the story of the *Gigantomachia*, in which the Giants fought the gods for control of heaven, but in literary terms the message is also clear. Attempts to be too clever and to challenge the heights of Olympus in the poetic world might also raise divine anger. Horace, though, is not necessarily speaking in criticism of Vergil's plans: after all he himself had admitted to looking for a place with the stars in the first ode of this same book (1.1.35). Moreover, both verbs have the subject 'we' ('we seek' and 'through our sin we let') – reminding the reader again of the close connection between Horace and Vergil established earlier in the poem.

The theme of anger lies at the heart of the *Aeneid*. At the opening of the epic we are told that it is because of the anger of savage Juno that Aeneas has been thrown around by land and sea; the questions are then asked, 'Which god was angered?' and 'Is there such anger in celestial minds?' In these opening lines of the epic, the anger of the goddess Juno, while recalling the anger of Poseidon in the *Odyssey*, also magnifies the greatness of Rome: such great work will cause anxiety amongst the gods by virtue of its greatness. Horace may well be recalling this theme, and interacting with what he has read thus far of the *Aeneid*: he is suggesting that Vergil's audacity in writing this epic is liable to arouse the continued wrath of the King of the gods, just as the hero of the epic, Aeneas, roused the anger of Juno.

## Getting by with a little help from one's friends

Further reference to the *Aeneid* is perceptible in the opening of Horace's poem: the goddess addressed is Venus, the powerful goddess of Cyprus. In the *Aeneid* she appears as the mother and protector of Aeneas. At the beginning of the epic, Juno in anger orders Aeolus, god of the winds, to stir up a great storm which will send Aeneas off course to Carthage. The hero is first seen

<i>Sic te diua potens Cypri, sic fratres Helenae, lucida sidera, uentorumque regat pater obstrictis aliis praeter Iapyga,</i>	
<i>nauis, quae tibi creditum debes Vergilium; finibus Atticis reddas incolumem precor et serues animae dimidium meae.</i>	5
<i>illi robur et aes triplex circa pectus erat, qui fragilem truci commisit pelago ratem primus, nec timuit praecipitem Africum</i>	10
<i>decertantem Aquilonibus nec tristis Hyadas nec rabiem Noti, quo non arbiter Hadriae maior, tollere seu ponere uolt freta.</i>	15
<i>quem mortis timuit gradum qui siccis oculis monstra natantia, qui uidit mare turbidum et infamis scopulos, Acrocerania?</i>	20
<i>nequiquam deus abscidit prudens Oceano dissociabili terras, si tamen impiae non tangenda rates transiliunt uada.</i>	
<i>audax omnia perpeti gens humana ruit per uestitum nefas; audax Iapeti genus ignem fraude mala gentibus intulit;</i>	25
<i>post ignem aetheria domo subductum macies et noua febrium terris incubuit cohors, semotique prius tarda necessitas</i>	30
<i>leti corripuit gradum. expertus uacuum Daedalus aëra pinnis non homini datis; perripit Acheronta Herculeus labor.</i>	35
<i>nil mortalibus ardui est; caelum ipsum petimus stultitia neque per nostrum patimur scelus iracunda Iouem ponere fulmina.</i>	40

*May the goddess who rules over Cyprus, may Helen's brothers, gleaming fires, and the father of the winds, confining all but Iapetus, guide thee so, O ship, which owest to us Virgil entrusted to thee – guide thee so that thou shalt bring him safe to Attic shores, I pray thee, and preserve the half of my own soul! Oak and triple bronze must have girt the breast of him who first committed his frail bark to the angry sea, and who feared not the furious south-west wind battling with the blasts of the north, nor the gloomy Hyades, not the rage of Notus, than whom there is no mightier master of the Adriatic, whether he choose to raise or calm the waves. What form of Death's approach feared he who with dry eyes gazed on the swimming monsters, on the stormy sea, and the ill-famed cliffs of Acroceraunia? Vain was the purpose of the god in severing the lands by the estranging main, if in spite of him our impious ships dash across the depths he meant should not be touched. Bold to endure all things, mankind rushes even through forbidden wrong. Iapetus' daring son by impious craft brought fire to the tribes of men. After fire was stolen from its home in heaven, wasting disease and a new throng of fevers fell upon the earth, and the doom of death, that before had been slow and distant, quickened its pace. Daedalus essayed the empty air on wings denied to man; the toiling Hercules burst through Acheron. No ascent is too steep for mortals. Heaven itself we seek in our folly, and through our sin we let Jove lay down his bolts of wrath.*

(Text and translation by C. E. Bennett)

in desperation attempting to lead his men through this trouble. On his arrival in Africa, Aeneas is protected by his mother. She has prepared the Carthaginians for his arrival and, in disguise, points him in the direction of the queen's palace. In *Odes* 1.3 Horace calls upon Venus, the very deity who would guide and protect Aeneas when he arrives in Carthage, to watch over the poet as she watched over her son.

Horace then recalls the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux, Helen of Troy's brothers, who became immortal in heaven as a constellation. They were known to protect seamen, something much needed by Vergil at this point. They may also have further significance. Like Vergil in the poem, they made a journey to Attica from their native Sparta (see Stephen Hodgkinson's piece in the next issue), when Helen had been kidnapped by Theseus. They recovered her, and carried off Theseus' mother, Aethra. In a similar manner, the poet will be carrying something away from Attica as he composes the *Aeneid*. The literary dominance afforded Athens by Greek literature will give way to the Roman literature composed by Vergil and Horace.

Finally he requests that the father of the winds, Aeolus, may rule the winds. In the *Aeneid*, Aeolus' response to Juno's request for a storm had been very clear: he would do as he was told, but this storm was Juno's responsibility (*Aeneid* 1.76–80). The prayer that the Father of the Winds rule recalls this scene: under Juno's influence he had not been allowed to rule. It also recalls the gift of the bag of winds to Odysseus in the *Odyssey*: that bag, given by Aeolus, had given the voyager the wind he required to get home. Aeolus, as a benevolent force, would help and not hinder.

### Bravery before a fall

Horace then emphasizes the courage of the first man to make an expedition by boat: his heart must have been surrounded by oak and bronze. Here again he makes reference to Vergil's courage

as he embarks on the composition of the *Aeneid*, as the first man to take on the challenge of Homer. Horace lends further weight to the boldness of this undertaking by placing *primus* ('first') at the beginning of the twelfth line, at the end of the relative clause. The notion of crossing the sea recalls the Hellenistic view of epic as like the Ocean: it is huge, and, in Callimachus' view, lacking in refinement. Nevertheless, it takes great courage to cross it. In the *Aeneid*, meanwhile, the first we see of the hero is when he has to demonstrate that same courage, as he is battered by the storm of Juno's making. He begins to doubt himself, wishing he had died at Troy, but then recovers, and leads his men ultimately to Dido's palace.

The poem continues to recall the adventures of the *Aeneid* with references to the African and South Winds in conflict with one another: Africa recalls the site of Carthage. The African wind is described as *praecipitem* meaning 'furious', 'violent', or 'headlong', the word also used by Vergil to describe the fall of Palinurus, Aeneas' helmsman, from his ship in book five of the *Aeneid* (5.860). Palinurus had been leading the Trojans as they came close to the coast of Italy. He was then overcome by sleep, and fell to his death in accordance with Venus' pact with Neptune to placate the anger of Juno. This is one of the most moving moments in the *Aeneid*, as the poet addresses Palinurus himself directly, to describe how Sleep came to search for him, and overcame him, innocent though he was (5.841).

Horace's evocation of the journey described by the first half of the *Aeneid* continues as he describes how a god has separated the lands with the 'estranging' or 'separating' (*dissociabili*) Ocean. The journey which Aeneas makes is from Troy to Italy, from East to West, with the opposition of the goddess Juno all the way. Likewise, Vergil's own journey in writing this epic is one from East to West: from the Greek world of Homer and Apollonius to a new world of Roman epic. Impious ships are thereby crossing the waves which should not be touched (1.3.23–4).

The adjective *impiae* ('impious') (1.3.23) used to describe the ships is also significant, for it is from here on that Horace will develop the notion of the boldness of man, with the human race rushing to destruction *per uetitum nefas* ('through forbidden wrong'). This point is further illustrated by the mythical example of Prometheus (1.3.27). In Greek mythology Prometheus brought fire to men, and thereby enabled humanity to advance and make progress – progress which the gods had forcefully opposed. Such actions required considerable audacity. Such a myth, therefore, can be seen as man overcoming superstitions, something essential for progress. The notion of rushing *per uetitum nefas* also recalls Lucretius, whose poetry, written in the first century B.C., denounced those who lived under the influence of superstition, and encouraged man to transcend such fears through knowledge of philosophy. Thus the notion of boldness, so emphasized through the repetition of *audax* need not be seen as a negative thing – such boldness leads to progress, and Vergil has taken steps which will lead to progress in the poetic field.

On the other hand, Prometheus' achievements were ultimately disastrous for men. Likewise Daedalus looked to use wings which were not given to humans and Heracles went down to snatch Cerberus. The methods used in each of these cases suggest that each had gone a step too far: to be bold is one thing, but to not respect the law is quite another. Events have their consequences, and one must be aware of them before undertaking a task.

### Fellow travellers

*Odes* 1.3 may be seen as a response to Horace's reading of the early parts of the *Aeneid*: he is impressed by the audacity of his friend's project, and invokes the warnings common in this period to lend his support. Divine anger is only justified because of the magnitude of the task, just as it was in response to Aeneas' Roman mission. The poem also establishes a close connection between the two poets, and links their literary work: both are

engaged in the process of bringing the glories of civilized literature to the Latin language. Both will have to face the consequences of their great efforts.

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